

Factors Associated with Tourism Growth and Travelers' Motivations: The Case of Savannakhet Province, Lao PDR

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Abstract

Tourism growth acts as a significant tool in supporting economic development and poverty alleviation of developing countries, such as Lao PDR. Savannakhet, one of the country's top three most-visited provinces, was the focus of this study. Despite its record of good tourism growth over the last few decades, this province was chosen by only a small percentage of travelers as their final destination with overnight stops. The present study investigated tourism growth in Savannakhet, major factors influencing tourism growth, and tourist motivation to visit this province. The mixed-method approach was used to elicit quantitative and qualitative data which were collected through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and questionnaires. The results show that Savannakhet is ideally located in the center of the Mekong sub-region. With overland transport corridors and the Second Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge, Savannakhet has benefited from the growth of trade, investments, and tourism. The major motivations for tourists to travel to Savannakhet are its location, a culture similar culture to that of its neighbors, relaxation, and a gateway. However, most tourist locations in Savannakhet, according to SWOT analysis, still lack dominant attractiveness, sufficient tourism packages, tour operators, and supportive public transportation. Our findings suggest several strategies for tourism development in Savannakhet to draw more tourists from both domestic and international levels by improving its infrastructure and services in tourism sectors, strengthening community-based tourism, and developing creative tourism.

Keywords: tourism, tourism growth, SWOT, Savannakhet, Lao PDR

Introduction

Global tourism, one of the fastest-growing economies in the world, has continued to expand in various commerce and business sectors over decades. Kyara et al. (2021) indicate that tourism expansion is related to economic growth, which contributes to GDP and employment. Gaps and opportunities of tourism situations in each country were evaluated using the travel and tourism competitiveness index (TTCI). This benchmark is beneficial to all tourist stakeholders because they could increase competitiveness and ensure that their necessary policies, infrastructure, and management systems are in place to support tourism growth (Moutinho and Vargas-Sánchez, 2018). For developing countries like Lao PDR, the factors which could cause low scores on competitiveness were transportation infrastructure, international openness, ICT readiness, and health and hygiene (World Economic Forum, 2019).

Despite the fact that Lao PDR's infrastructure ranked relatively low according to the TTCI, transportation plays a vital role in tourist and economic growth (Kyophilavong et al., 2018; Phakdisoth and Kim, 2007). Air transportation, overland routes, and the Friendship Bridges across neighboring countries have facilitated the majority of tourist arrivals, including casino tourists, to Lao PDR. In 2019, 4.79 million international tourists visited this country, with 0.64 million tourists visiting Savannakhet (Tourism Development Department, 2019). Most of the international arrivals come overland from Thailand, Vietnam, and Vientiane. Until now, and following the Covid-19 recession, it has been anticipated that tourists would use the major departure ports of Lao PDR, which are the Second Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge and Dansavanh-Lao Bao International Checkpoint. These are primary borders crossing with Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam.

The present study focused on tourism growth in Savannakhet province, the largest province of Lao PDR. After the completion of the Second Friendship Bridge, Savannakhet became well-known to international investors, traders, and tourists. Previous studies have

investigated tourism development in Lao PDR in different dimensions, e.g. community-based tourism (CBT), pro-poor tourism, and ecotourism (Harrison and Schipani, 2007; Park et al., 2018; Suntikul et al., 2009). However, we still have limited data regarding key factors affecting tourism growth in Lao PDR. Furthermore, specific information on the key factors enhancing the competitiveness and development of Savannakhet's tourism industry is scarce. The present study investigates how tourism has grown in Savannakhet and identifies the major factors that drive tourism growth as well as tourist motivation to travel to this province.

Tourism growth plays a significant role as a tool for supporting economic development and poverty alleviation of developing countries (Kyara et al., 2021). To investigate the growth of tourism, all stakeholders must understand the factors of supply and demand. The demand side is driven by the increase of the global population and economic growth (Dwyer, 2018) whilst the supply side is dependent upon the places' characteristics. Although the rate of growth can be indicated by exploring external factors (e.g. GDP per capita and revenues from tourism of the country of reference and climate), it is also important to explore internal factors such as the capacities and competitive advantages of tourist sites (Eyisi et al., 2021; Kyophilavong et al., 2018; UNWTO, 2015). In addition, competitiveness factors relating to the environment of the location, quality of life, technological advancement, and education level of the local people should be considered (Balkytė and Tvaronavičienė, 2010).

This study employed mixed methods to collect data. The qualitative approach included in-depth interviews and focus group discussions to interpret the data related to factors that influence tourism growth in the province as a tourist destination. SWOT analysis based on focus group discussions was conducted to comprehensively evaluate Savannakhet tourism in terms of its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. The questionnaire survey approach was also used to better understand travelers' motivations to visit Savannakhet. Therefore, the results of this study could be useful to decision makers in the

development of the tourism sector in Lao PDR and could provide guidance for Savannakhet's sustainable tourism development plan.

The Background and Tourism Situation of Savannakhet

Regarding Savannakhet's history, the province was once known *Savanh Nakone*, which means "city of paradise" or "heavenly city." The area around Savannakhet province was under the influence of a Cham kingdom from the 7th to the 10th century, followed by a Khmer kingdom until the 13th century. During the Vietnam War, it was used as a U.S. military base. Savannakhet has a total land area of 21,774 km.² Almost 90 percent of its area is flat land, and the remaining 10 percent is mountainous and an eastern protected forest. Savannakhet is rich in natural resources; 52 percent of the area is covered with forests and national parks. The Mekong River is one of the most important rivers passing through Savannakhet and is important for providing a habitat for numerous aquatic species as well as for irrigation system development, and electricity generation (Poverty-Environment Initiative of Lao PDR, 2011).

Regarding Savannakhet's population, the city has diverse ethnic groups of which Lao and Phouthai account for 75 percent of the total. The remaining groups belong to the Mon-Khmer-speaking Bru, Katang, Souay, Mankhong, So, and Trii (Savannakhet Provincial Tourism Department, 2012). Over the few last decades, the incidence of poverty in Savannakhet province has been declining from 20.8 percent in 2004 to 10 percent in 2010 (Poverty-Environment Initiative of Lao PDR, 2011). The government of Lao PDR has relied on natural resources, e.g. minerals, forest, land and fresh water during this time. To achieve high GDP growth targets by 2020, UNDP (United Nations Environment Programme) facilitated the collaboration of government agencies, United Nations agencies, NGOs, civil society organizations, and the private sector to invest in other areas including tourism (UNDP, 2021).

Regarding tourism potential, Savannakhet possesses a total of 117 tourist sites, consisting of 74 natural, 32 cultural, and 11 historical

sites (Tourism Development Department, 2020). Although Savannakhet is not a major tourism city, its long history providing a mix of cultures from Eastern and Western continents may attract specific tourist groups (Sirivejjabhandu, 2019). International tourism is one of the government's poverty-alleviation strategies as it has provided a vital source of foreign exchange and employment since 1989. The significant turning point of Laos PDR tourism is the contribution of the Lao government policies to the open-door policy since 1986. Since then, the country's first national tourism plan was published in 1990, bringing about increased income and employment by expanding the tourism sector throughout the country (Harrison and Schipani, 2007; Zhang and Zhang, 2018). The second National Tourism Development plan in 1998 was designed to appeal to tourists with specific interests, such as ecotourism, CBT and green tourism. Consequently, the National Tourism Strategy for Lao PDR was announced in 2004 to support tourism in several dimensions such as poverty alleviation and CBT development. Consequently, the number of tourist arrivals to Lao PDR increased rapidly during 1994-2015 even though it dropped in some periods due to external factors such as the terrorist attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001, the SARS epidemic in Asia in 2003, and the global recession in 2009 (Kyophilavong et al., 2018). Thus, the GDP per capita in Savannakhet was recorded at US \$1,000 in 2012 (Lao Intergro Limited, 2012). Up to now, Lao tourism development policies reflect the interplay between the Lao government and the development stakeholders. The key actors are the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank (ADB), UNESCO, SNV (a Netherlands development organization), and Lao government sectors, such as the Lao National Tourism Administration (Harrison and Schipani, 2007; The World Bank, 2019).

Methods

The sequential mixed-method research design was used in the present study as shown in the methodological framework (Figure 1). The study carried out two main approaches which covered demand and supply

tourism stakeholders. The first one was a qualitative approach based on document analysis, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions. This approach identified the key factors that drive tourism growth and analyzed the current tourism situation of Savannakhet from the supply side. In this regard, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions provided a free atmosphere for respondents to respond to questions and establish a comfortable rapport with researchers (Bakogiannis et al., 2020; Creswell, 2012). The second approach focused on demand sides, using a questionnaire survey and analyzing quantitative data. This approach explored the motivations of tourists who paid a visit to Savannakhet.

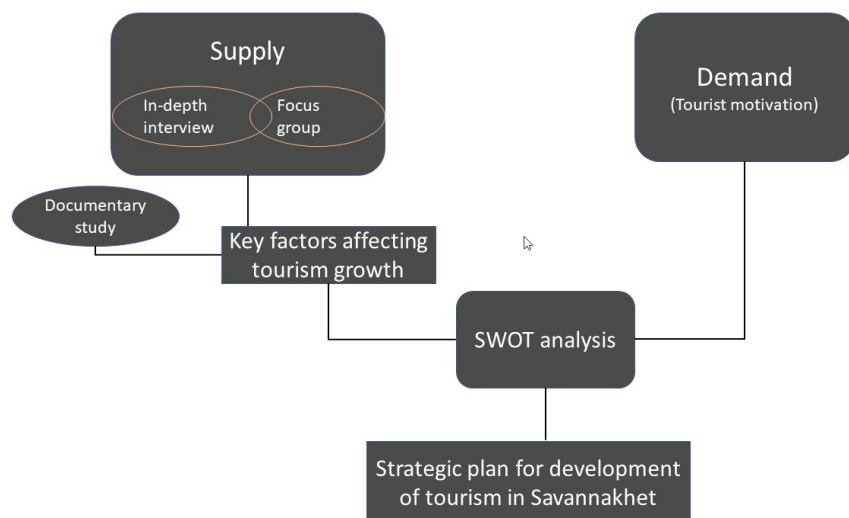


Figure 1 Conceptual framework of the present study. After the sequential mixed-method approach was conducted, SWOT analysis was developed to illustrate the tourist growth in Savannakhet province.

For the qualitative approach, a purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants having the characteristics necessary to answer research questions based on their knowledge and experience, according to the inclusion criteria (Eyisi et al., 2020; Koerber and

McMichael, 2008; MacNealy, 1999). In this study, a total of 25 informants were selected who had worked for or run businesses related to tourism sectors for at least one year in Savannakhet province. The informants consisted of tourism authorities from the Tourism Development Department, Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism; the Savannakhet Information, Culture and Tourism Department; tourism operating agencies; the service and accommodation sectors; souvenir shops; and restaurants. They were divided into two groups: 1) an in-depth interview group, in which 10 participants took part in semi-structured interviews; and 2) a focus discussion group, in which 15 participants shared their opinions. The focus group method aimed to highlight specific points relevant to tourism growth followed by the SWOT analysis. To estimate sample size, various factors, including the quality and amount of the data obtained from each participant, the scope and nature of the study, and the study design were considered. Regarding a large amount of data for each participant, the phenomenological study required 6 to 10 participants (Morse, 2000). In this study, the useful information obtained from 25 participants was therefore adequate. Furthermore, the results derived from focus group and individual interview can ensure the validity of the results (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983).

Next, data collection of the qualitative approach was conducted from two phases. The first phase, in-depth interviews, involved semi-structured face-to-face interviews. An appointment was made prior to the interview and each interview lasted from 45 minutes to one hour. Each informant was allowed to express his or her views on the tourism situation and predominant factors that drove tourism growth in Savannakhet. Personal perspectives can be connected to social phenomena to reflect reality (Chen and Chen, 2016; Nguyen et al., 2021). Simultaneously, various secondary documents, i.e. government publications, reports, and digital documents, were gathered to supplement data from the interviews. In the second phase, focus group discussions were carried out to obtain participants' opinions and to build interactions among participants.

The quantitative approach was carried out to examine tourists' motivations to visit Savannakhet. An accidental or convenience sampling is a potential method to find available participants in public locations and ask passers-by to participate (Etikan et al., 2016). During the fieldwork in the early stage of the COVID-19 pandemic, there were time constraints and a limited number of available tourists. Thus, convenience sampling was undertaken to find participants. A total of 38 tourists were found to fill out questionnaires exploring their motivations to visit Savannakhet. This approach can elicit the perspectives of tourists as the demand side to reflect the growth of tourist travelers. Tourist motivations play a significant role in tourist decision-making regarding their trips and behavior on travel phenomena (Park et al., 2019; Yousaf et al., 2018). The study of tourists' motivations also provides key indicators for tourism-related stakeholders to manage and develop plans that fit the tourists' demand and buyers' preference (Bayih and Singh, 2020).

To develop the questionnaire regarding the tourists' motivations in this study, Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1970) was used as an outline to form the investigation of motivations with additional motivation items by Iso-Ahola (1982) and push/pull theory (Dann, 1977). According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the fulfilment of human needs is usually followed in a hierarchical order. It starts with the lowest order, which is basic physiological needs (e.g., good food, fresh air, good sleep, and relaxation). The first group is initially satisfied; it is then followed by safety needs, a sense of belonging and love needs, esteem needs and self-actualization or fulfilment needs (the highest order). However, motivations of tourists are complex, which can result in changes of the decision-making process on choosing destinations. A comprehension of tourism motivation has been integrated with different factors to explain how tourists decide to travel to certain destinations. Iso-Ahola suggested two motivational drivers: escapism (a tendency to escape from daily life activities related to personal and interpersonal problems), and reward (a tendency to seek essential rewards by traveling in various conditions). The ideas of both Maslow

and Iso-Ahola were used to explain tourist decision making in choosing rural tourism (Šimková and Holzner, 2014). Furthermore, a different spectrum of push/pull motivation drivers from in-depth interviews was also extracted to guide specific reasons of motivation on the questionnaire for better tourist motivation explanations. Therefore, 13 reasons for visiting Savannakhet were selected for assessing the motivation drivers in the questionnaire (Table 1). Responses were marked according to their opinions (motivation, medium, low, and no motivation) in each item.

Table 1 List of selected items for assessing tourists' motivation to visit Savannakhet and their support concepts/sources

Reason for visiting Savannakhet	Concepts	Sources
1. Relaxation	Physiological needs,	Hierarchy of needs Maslow (1954) Push/pull theory Dann (1977)
2. Fresh air and beautiful nature	Push factors	
3. Friendly and safe society	Safety & love needs,	
4. Similar culture/less adaptation	Push factors	
5. Escape from daily life	Personal escape and reward, Push factors	Iso-Ahola (1982) Push/pull theory Dann (1977)
6. Adventure	Esteem need,	Hierarchy of needs Maslow (1954) Push/pull theory Dann (1977)
7. Historical knowledge (cognitive need)	Push factors	
8. Meditation practice	Self-actualization, Push factor	
9. Good accessibility	Pull factors	Push/pull theory Dann (1977)
10. Location/Gateway		
11. Authenticity/rural ambience		
12. Unique lifestyle/slow life		
13. Low tourism expense		

After collecting the data, thematic analysis was carried out, using the qualitative method. This analysis was to identify, extract, analyze and report interview transcripts into core themes or categories

(Castleberry and Nolen, 2018; Kodir et al., 2020). The thematic analysis process is composed of five main steps: 1) transcribing data several times in the process of familiarization; 2) coding and grouping data into different categories that fit it into a pre-existing coding frame; 3) identifying and rearranging categories into the key themes; 4) interpreting key findings from the predetermined themes; 5) reporting themes relevant to research questions and literature (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Osman et al., 2020). In this study, the key factors that affected tourism growth in Savannakhet were analyzed into themes. Next, the descriptive quantitative method was employed to present the main tourists' motivations for visiting Savannakhet.

For the final steps, SWOT analysis was implemented to analyze the key performance of tourism growth in Savannakhet and determine appropriate strategies for tourism planning. Data from supply and demand sides and specific issues were obtained through focus group discussion in this study. SWOT is a good strategic tool for tourism planning which will promote tourism by developing an understanding of the strengths of Savannakhet, addressing weaknesses to growth, capitalizing on opportunities for growth, and countering threats to growth (Dwyer, 2018).

Results and Discussion

Identify Factors Associated with Tourism Growth in Savannakhet

Regarding the qualitative approach, previous reports primarily provided a view of the factors affecting tourism growth in Savannakhet, including geographical location, the overall number of visitors, income and economic growth, service investment, accessibility, accommodations, infrastructure, tourist arrivals, and tourism resources. However, there are only a limited number of studies shedding light on tourism in Savannakhet. This scarcity indicates the necessity of carrying out in-depth interviews. Regarding the thematic interpretation, the 11 key factors associated with tourism growth in Savannakhet were categorized into four main categories and eight themes from the interviews (Table 2).

Table 2 Key relevant factors associated with tourism growth in Savannakhet

Key factors from literature	Theme/sub-theme from interviews	Mention (%) from coding	Interpretation Category
Geographical location	The Second Friendship Bridge	6.45	Geographic accessibilities
Overland transportation expansion	The EWEC	6.45	
Accessibility	Gateway	12.90	
	Cross border/overland route	3.23	
Tourist Resources	Tourist Attractions	6.45	Tourist attractions
	Casino	11.29	
	Seminars	3.23	
	Temples	12.90	
	Natural attractions	6.45	
	Wartime heritage	6.45	
	Shopping/OTOP	4.84	
	Cruise	1.62	
Special economic zone	Special economic zone	3.25	Economic growth and government support
Income and Economic growth	Government policy support	4.88	
Number of tourist arrivals			
Service investments (tourism sectors)	Facilities		Superstructures
Travel Agencies	Parking	3.23	
Restaurants and entertainment	Toilets	3.23	
Accommodations & Casinos	Accommodations/ restaurants/souvenir shops	3.23	

1. Geographical accessibility

Savannakhet is located on the banks of the Mekong River, which is bordered by Vietnam to the east and Thailand to the west. Significant factors in increasing the province's incomes were the completion of the Second Friendship Bridge and the establishment of the East-West Economic Corridor (EWEC) project in 2006. The EWEC (Road Number 9 in Savannakhet territory) is a major inter-connecting route within Southeast Asia passing through developing areas of four nations: Myanmar, Thailand, Lao PDR and Vietnam. This route runs across Savannakhet province as a gateway to Mukdahan province (Thailand) and Quang Tri province (Vietnam). In addition, Road Number 13 is further crossed by Route No. 13 from China to Cambodia, connecting the EWEC throughout the Asian region (Figure 2). After the opening of the bridge in 2007, Savannakhet received the second-highest number of vehicle registrations in Lao PDR, having increased 20 percent per year from 60,000 to 127,000 during 2005-2009 (Nolintha, 2011). This increase has created ideal opportunities for overland trips as it facilitates trade, investments, labor, services, and tourism movements throughout the province as well as the ASEAN region.

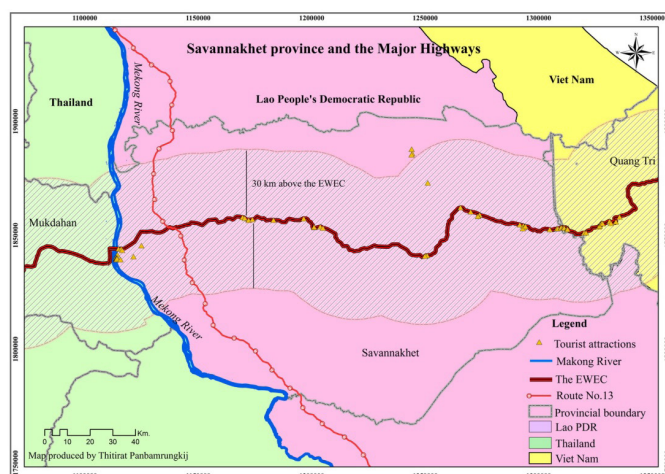


Figure 2 Savannakhet city and the major highways.

Participants noted that the expansion of road and bridge constructions has benefited the city, as follows:

As a result of good accessibility, tourism in Savannakhet boomed in the last two years after the construction of the Second Friendship Bridge. The city has benefited from being a central part along of route linkage to other regions (Travel Agency B [Pseudonym], 2018).

Ever since we've had the bridge, there have been annual overland route tours (called "big bike caravans") across the bridge in February. Savannakhet acted as the gateway to other cities such as Hue, Danang, and Pakse (Tourist Officer C [Pseudonym], 2018).

The EWEC contributes the package tours that attracted several tourists who would like to visit Mukdahan (Thailand) and Hue (Vietnam) via Savannakhet. (Hotel Owner A). Since the Second Friendship Bridge has been in operation, a vast number of Thai tourists, who visited Nakhon Phanom and Mukdahan provinces, booked package tours to visit Savannakhet because they expected to transit to some other destinations, e.g. Hue Danang Pakse and Vientiane (Travel Agency A [Pseudonym], 2018).

Nowadays, three modes of transport – land, air, and river – are the main access for visitors who want to travel to Savannakhet. The bulk of international arrivals come overland from Thailand, Vietnam, and Vientiane. A major departure port enters via the Second Friendship Bridge, and the Dansavanh-Lao Bao International Checkpoint is a busy and convenient border crossing between Lao and Vietnam. In addition, the first direct air-conditioned bus services have been operating since early 2008 from Khon Kaen (Thailand) to Vientiane (Lao PDR) and from Mae Sot/Mukdahan (Thailand) to Hue (Vietnam) via Savannakhet (Lao PDR). Finally, there are seven domestic public buses and VIP buses with toilets and air-conditioners that service travellers to commute back and forth between Vientiane and Savannakhet.

For traveling within the city, local mini-buses (*song thaews*) are available in downtown Savannakhet at Savanxay market while various bus stations can be found at district centers and larger towns. However,

there are fewer stops along the way through the districts of Savannakhet. As for air transport, two to three flights per week operated by Lao Airlines are scheduled from Bangkok, Luang Prabang, and Vientiane to Savannakhet and back. Furthermore, ferryboats crossing the Mekong River between Mukdahan and Savannakhet piers operate daily.

2. Tourist attractions

As for international tourist arrivals to Savannakhet (Table 3), the number of visitors from the neighboring countries of Thailand and Vietnam by far represented the largest proportion of tourist arrivals (61.6 and 34.2 percent, respectively). Thai visitors ranked highest as the main inbound market, comprising 91.8 percent of visitors to Savannakhet via the Second Friendship Bridge. Furthermore, the opening of Savan Vegas Casino in 2009 has contributed to a high proportion of intra-regional short-haul visitors. An unofficial estimate of visitors to the casino reached an average of 40,000 people per month.

Table 3 Savannakhet's top tourist arrivals from three major entrances (the Second Friendship Bridge, Savanh Airport, and the Dan Savanh-Lao Bao Border)

Nationality	Friendship Bridge II	Savanh Airport	Dan Savanh Border	Total
Thailand	364,193	550	24,776	389,519
Vietnam	14,667	78	201,598	216,343
Philippines	5,611	31	637	6,279
USA	2,887	547	861	4,295
United Kingdom	1,846	122	742	2,710
France	1,376	192	862	2,430
Russia	1,346	8	441	1,795
Japan	1,230	248	247	1,725
Malaysia	1,117	94	253	1,464
Korea (Rep)	1,050	31	1,378	2,459
China	887	426	1,144	2,457
Germany	633	50	449	1,132

Source: Tourism Development Department (2019)

In interviews, most participants mentioned that Savannakhet has remarkable authentic and natural attractions; however, some are located far from the city center and thus are less comfortable to access, e.g. Phou Xang Hae National Protected Area and Dong Phou Vieng National Protected Area. In the same vein as rural tourism, the tourists pursue unspoiled nature, traditional rural life, authentic experience, and escaping from the usual environment of everyday life (Simkova and Holzner, 2014).

Cultural sites were also in high demand, especially Buddhism temples and old French colonial architecture. As noted by respondents:

Many tourists preferred to visit temples in the city such as That Ing Hang, That Phon, and Wat Xayaphom (Xayaphom temple). Some group tours booked the city tours of which most tourist attractions were wats (temples), OTOP handicraft and French colonial buildings (Accommodation A [Pseudonym], 2018).

Buddhist temples and cultural sites were also sought after by Thai group tours, some of whom came to pray for success in their careers (Tourist Officer B [Pseudonym], 2018).

Although this area suffered from a history of violence during the Vietnam War and the struggle for independence, the remnants of war are accompanied by the calm lifestyle of the rural villages (Figure 3). This deep-rooted history offers potential for numerous colonial and wartime heritage sites within the region. For example, there are examples of old French architecture, bomb craters, battlefields, war remnant museums and the Ho Chi Minh Trail, which are easily accessible along the way (Panbamrungkij, 2014). Although casinos were one of the main purposes of tourists visiting the city, the participants agreed that the wartime heritage sites have attracted several visitors in Savannakhet. As noted by respondents:

Many French and American tourists came to visit the places that related to war along the EWEC route and the Ho Chi Minh trail (Travel Agency A [Pseudonym], 2018).

Some groups of western tourists wanted to explore the war heritage tourist attractions (Restaurant B [Pseudonym], 2018).

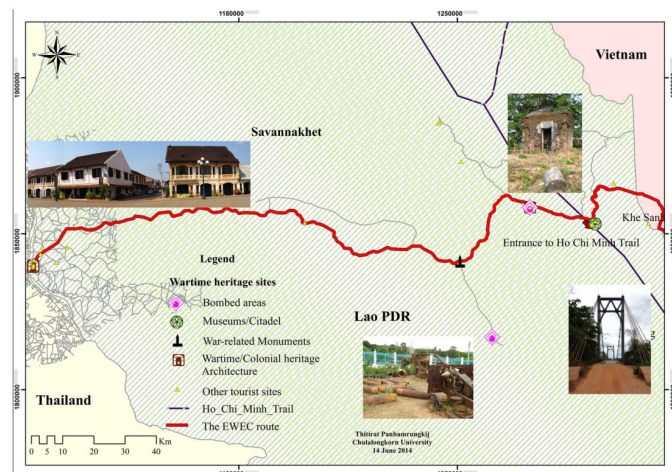


Figure 3 Map of wartime heritage sites in Savannakhet.

3. Economic growth and government support

Savannakhet's economy has developed rapidly since the last decade with an average annual growth rate of 10.5 percent per year. The provincial GDP per capita has been continually increasing from 653 to US\$ 1785 in the fiscal years 2007/08 and 2015/16, respectively (Poverty-Environment Initiative of Lao PDR, 2011). Although agriculture has remained the province's major economic structure for the last few decades, the service sector (e.g. working at the casino and tourism) and the industrial sector have been increasing gradually. This trend of economic contribution strongly indicates the role of the service sectors as the leading source of income for Savannakhet residents. Revenue from the tourism industry has risen dramatically and tourism has quickly been regarded as a major export industry for Savannakhet.

Consequently, the Lao PDR government has established 12 economic zones as of 2019 (Ministry of Planning and Investment, 2019). In Savannakhet, the Savan-Seno Special Economic Zone (SEZ) was opened in 2011. The Lao PDR government has offered special economic privileges to foreign investors in the special zone, allowing them to buy real estate and to live permanently in Lao PDR (ASEAN Watch, 2013). The government believes that this policy would leverage the Lao

economy and expand the national revenue. With the reference to the SEZ, some interviews claimed that the number of workers in factories has increased. These workers will travel to many places in Savannakhet during days off or holidays. In addition, the SEZ has contributed to new types of tourism as seen in a seminar tour or work-based tour. As noted by participants:

Government employees from neighboring countries such as Thailand and Vietnam were among the major customers. They usually came here to visit the factories in the SEZ and travel around the city (Travel Agency D [Pseudonym], 2018).

The foreign investors from more than 90 factories also want to know more about the history of the province and tourist attractions during their stay in this province (Tourist Officer A [Pseudonym], 2018).

As a result of the government and their partners' support, the number of tourist arrivals has been growing steadily since 2001 (Figure 4) with an average annual growth of 16 percent between 2001 and 2019. The numbers tripled from 192,385 in 2006 (before the completion of the main transport services) to 430,604 in 2007, which was largely attributed to the overall growth of tourism throughout the country during that year. Remarkably, the number of tourists surpassed one million in 2011. Thus, Savannakhet has become one of the Lao PDR's top three most-visited provinces in 2002-2018.

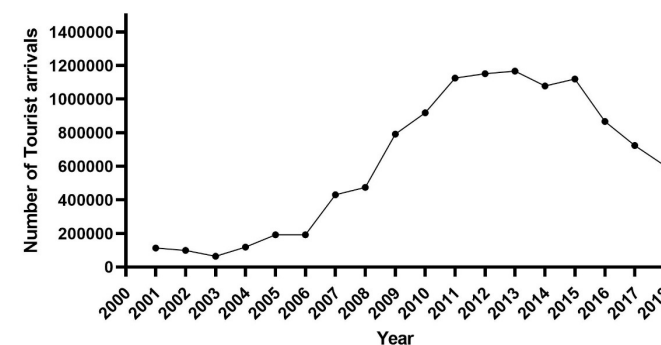


Figure 4 Tourist arrivals in Savannakhet between 2001-2018.

However, the tourism situation in Savannakhet depends on neighboring countries (both Thailand and Vietnam). For example, the number of Thai tourists had dramatically decreased during 2014-2016 because of the political instability in Thailand. It is intriguing to note that some of the participants viewed the Thai visitors as a superior group, which affected the income of tourism sectors in Savannakhet. On the other hand, there were continuous collaborations between several sectors from Thailand, Lao PDR and Vietnam. As noted by a tourist officer:

Currently, we have set the collaboration in arranging the annual meeting between particular provinces in three countries; they are Mukdahan (Thailand), Savannakhet (Lao PDR), and Quang Tri (Vietnam). For example, in 2016 Thailand will be the host for the signing of a memorandum of understanding (MOU) on tourist co-operation and expanding the EWEC route. The government also organized a tourism campaign to widen interest among domestic and international visitors. It brought about an increase in the number of tourists to the province (Tourist Officer B [Pseudonym], 2018).

4. Superstructure

Savannakhet province received high foreign direct investment (FDI) growth after the opening of the Second Friendship Bridge. Its socio-economic development has been influenced by the FDI (Binh et al., 2021). The FDI in the service sector accounted for 8 percent of the total investments related to tourism, trade, and transportation. Additionally, casinos, hotels, logistic systems, and banking played essential roles for a considerable number of service providers (Nolintha, 2011). Savan Vegas Casino & Hotel, a large investment project located in Savannakhet town, has stimulated investments in related sectors, including hotels, guesthouses, restaurants, bars, shops, entertainment places, and others. This has generated jobs and income for the locals in both direct and indirect ways (Poverty-Environment Initiative of Lao PDR, 2011).

Travers (2008) proposed that the number of accommodation establishments was one of the main indicators of tourism growth in Lao PDR. The completion of the Savan Vegas Casino & Hotel project in 2009 has attracted a large movement of people to this area. Approximately 1,500 people cross the border to visit the casino and take part in other activities relating to tourism and leisure in Savannakhet province (Savannakhet Provincial Tourism Department, 2012). As some participants note:

Most package tours are to casinos, which mostly serve Thai tourists. There were about 1000 casino tourists per day who usually booked every weekend to stay in the hotel during the period 2007-2014 (Hotel Owner C [Pseudonym], 2018).

Some tourist groups only dropped in for 30 minutes at the casino because they did not like the smell of smoke there (Hotel Owner D [Pseudonym], 2020).

New hotels have subsequently been constructed along the river after the Friendship Bridge operated for a few years (Hotel Owner A [Pseudonym], 2018).

Some homestays are available near the tourist attractions especially natural sites and Dongmuang Mongkey jungle (Souvenir B [Pseudonym], 2018).

An increase in room availability reflects visitors' demands in the developing city (Lao National Tourism Administration, 2009). The number of accommodation establishments (e.g. hotels, guesthouses, and resorts) in Savannakhet has been expanding consistently during 2008-2019, from 83 to 210 (Tourism Development Department, 2019). The number of rooms increased nearly twofold during the same period from 1,758 rooms to 2,920 rooms (Table 4). Interestingly, even though the number of tourist arrivals has dropped since 2016, the number of accommodation establishments has been increasing from 175 in 2012 to 210 in 2019. In addition, the number of restaurants has grown by 10 percent since 2008 after the completion of the Second Friendship Bridge

and the EWEC route. Recently, the number of restaurants has increased to 215 sites, while entertainment activities attracting travellers have increased to 7-8 sites in the city.

Table 4 The number of hotels, guesthouses/resorts, restaurants and entertainment activities in Savannakhet province in 2008, 2012 and 2019.

Superstructure	Year	Details	Savannakhet (SK)	Total Lao PDR	SK/Total Lao PDR (%)
Total Accommodations	2008	Numbers	83	1,385	5.99
		Rooms	1,758	22,173	7.93
		Beds	N/A	N/A	N/A
	2012	Numbers	175	3,690	4.945
		Rooms	2,030	35,857	47.394
		Beds	8.62	10.29	10.43
	2019	Numbers	210	4,686	6040
		Rooms	2,920	55,541	73,339
		Beds	7.19	8.44	8.24
Restaurants	2008		19	742	2.56
	2012		139	1,276	10.89
	2019		215	2,679	8.03
Entertainment spots	2008		4	164	2.44
	2012		8	220	3.64
	2019		7	246	2.85

Remarks: Number: Number of accommodation establishments; N/A: No data.

Source: Tourism Development Department (2019)

The number of travel agencies has increased from two in 2006 to 12 in 2012 (Tourism Development Department, 2012). In the year 2012, the government promoted tourism as “Visit Laos Year” under the slogan “Simply Beautiful.” This campaign was an intended to increase tourism expenditures for Lao PDR as well as Savannakhet. The previous study revealed that most tour operators in Savannakhet could not provide sufficient information about the province. They also could not offer compelling tourist sites and competitive packages (Thomas, 2009).

Currently, the number of travel agencies has declined to 10 during 2019-2020. As noted by a travel agent and restaurant owner in this study, independent travelers or backpacker tourists have visited more frequently in the recent year. For instance, some Western groups, such as Japanese and Chinese tourists, will plan their own trips and stay with locals. Some backpackers came from Vientiane for sightseeing and stayed over at this city without using travel agencies.

Tourist Motivation for Visiting Savannakhet

Tourist motivation data were derived from direct interviews of 38 tourists who visited Savannakhet. Descriptive data and tourists’ motivations of 38 respondents visiting in Savannakhet are shown in Tables 5 and 6. The results underscored the fact that not all types of motivation were equally mentioned by the respondents. The most popular motivation for respondents visiting Savannakhet was its “similar culture” (57.9 percent) in which they could easily adapt to the new environment. This might explain why Thai and Vietnamese were the majority of tourist arrivals in Savannakhet (Table 3). In a recent study, most information signs in Savannakhet were bilingual (Lao and English) to communicate internationally. These two languages are regarded as languages of the ASEAN Community (Siwina and Prasithrathsint, 2020). The next motivations were “relaxation,” “location as a gateway,” and “friendly and safe society” (52.6, 50.0, and 47.4 percent, respectively). These reasons correspond with the basic needs of traveling to tourist destinations, according to Maslow’s theory on motivation. As was shown in the work of Simkova and Holzner (2014), the study found that respondents who travelled to rural and international destinations appeared to be seeking some personal rewards (relaxation, fresh air, unspoiled nature, and traditional rural life) and wanting to escape from their usual environment and workplace. In the interview data from this study, there were interesting comments from participants:

I usually go to many cities in Lao because I can go alone. At the time I visited tourist sites and restaurants, I was also able to communicate with the local people and understand the culture.... Many tourist signs were in Lao and English (Female Tourist A [Pseudonym], 2020).

Many tourists prefer to relax during their holiday time. This city is very easy to access and continue on to visit Hue and Danang (Travel Agent C [Pseudonym], 2018).

When I booked a package tour, my main destination was Vietnam. But I was dropped off at Savannakhet so that I could visit casinos and temples. After the Second Friendship bridge was in operation, my family and I could book a city tour and then continue to Hue for the next stop (Family Tourist B [Pseudonym], 2020).

Conversely, “meditation practice” accounted for the smallest proportion (15.8 percent) of the motivation of respondents who visited Savannakhet province. Jamaluddin et al. (2018) suggested that the highest levels of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, self-actualization, can be accomplished from push and pull motivations. The push/pull factors influenced tourist motivations, in particular tourist groups, that is, cross-border tourists and domestic tourists (Bayih and Singh, 2020; Jamaluddin et al., 2018; Osman et al., 2020; Park et al., 2019). Our findings emphasize that high-scale motivations, e.g. the similar culture, and opportunities to relax were classified as push factors, which refer to internal factors or personal motivation, while the high motivation of Savannakhet location as a gateway was the pull factor. These findings resonate with the suggestion of previous studies that pull factors are mainly considered the characteristics of the destination that attract travellers to choose a particular destination (Seebaluck et al., 2015).

SWOT Analysis of Tourism Development in Savannakhet

To initiate supporting strategies for tourism development in Savannakhet, data from the present study were analyzed to identify the internal factors (strengths/weaknesses) and external factors (opportunities/threats) through the SWOT analysis. Focus group discussions offered participants the opportunity to prioritize issues that are necessary for the decision-making process.

Table 5 Descriptive analysis of the respondents (n = 38)

Characteristic	Group	Percentage
Gender	Female	26.3
	Male	73.7
Age	<20	2.6
	20-39	50.0
	40-60	14.0
	>60	4.0
Occupation	Government employee	21.1
	Private employee	23.7
	Private business	15.8
	Trader	7.9
	Student	10.5
	Laborer	7.9
	Retiree	5.3
	Other	7.9
Length of stay	one day	44.7
	2 days	15.8
	3 days	28.9
	More than 3 days	10.5

Table 6 Tourists’ motivation to visit Savannakhet. The scale was classified as high, medium, low, and no motivation for each reason for visiting Savannakhet

Reasons for visiting Savannakhet		Motivation scale			
		High	Medium	Low	N/A
Push	Fresh air and beautiful natural sites	42.1	31.6	18.4	7.9
	Safety and love needs				
	Friendly and safe society	47.4	23.7	26.3	2.6
	Similar culture/less adaptation	57.9	21.1	7.9	13.2
	Escape from the stresses of daily life	36.8	34.2	7.9	21.1
	Esteem need				
	Adventure	44.7	31.6	15.8	7.9
	Historical knowledge (cognitive need)	31.6	31.6	21.1	15.8
	Self-actualization				
	Meditation practice	15.8	28.9	23.7	23.7
Pull	Good accessibility	39.5	39.5	18.4	2.6
	Location/gateway	50.0	28.9	18.4	2.6
	Authenticity/rural ambience	44.7	23.7	26.3	5.3
	Unique lifestyle/slow-paced life	44.7	23.7	26.3	5.3
	Low tourism expense	34.2	28.9	34.2	2.6

1. Strengths: S

The strength components of Savannakhet can be identified as follows:

Tourism resources: The province is home to untouched natural environments and locals still live surrounded by rich natural resources along with a traditional lifestyle and culture. This results in a high potential to promote authenticity in Lao PDR. Furthermore, there is a large number of potential tourist attractions with historical and cultural value, e.g. a Phuthai ethnic village and a Lao silk center.

Support of niche tourism: Because of the Vietnam War, wartime heritage sites can attract specific groups of tourists who are interested in history. The Savannakhet Tourism Office's vice president announced that a new war museum was officially opened in 2012. This museum displays extensive evidence and images related to the Vietnam War, including multimedia simulations of war through projectors. Savannakhet has also promoted cross-border tourism and casino tourism sites, such as Savan Vegas Casino & Hotel which is well known for visitors from the neighboring countries, especially Thai tourists as gambling is illegal in Thailand.

Spectacular view of the Mekong River: The Mekong River, one of the key natural resources which possesses a great diversity of plants and animals, offers a spectacular landscape for tourists. Moreover, the residents depend significantly on this river for living and receiving income from tourism activities.

Geographic location of Savannakhet: Its exceptional location facilitates the linking of overland touring routes among cities to the neighboring countries, such as the EWEC route and Route No. 13.

Accessibility to the city: Various transport modes (air, land using the Second Friendship Bridge and the Mekong river) are provided in Savannakhet.

2. Weaknesses: W

However, weaknesses identified by SWOT analysis are as follows:

Lack of images or stories on most tourist attractions: Most tourist sites do not display images or stories to represent the uniqueness of the locale.

Only gateway to other destination: The lack of activities in Savannakhet encourages tourists to consider staying longer at other sites. We found that most visitors just passed through this province as a gateway to other destinations in Thailand and Vietnam. They did not stop over to visit the local region and the number of visitors who stay overnight is relatively low. Thus, there have been few opportunities for local people to benefit from overnight tourists' spending in terms of accommodations, local souvenirs, restaurants, and other services.

Lack of management plan for improving tourist sites: There were no management plans for improving tourist sites, particularly in Hui Kong and Phalong waterfalls in Virabouly district or wartime heritage sites in Sepon district.

Insufficient tourism facilities: The number of service facilities at the tour sites such as toilets, directions signs, and tourist information centers is inadequate. We also found that there are not enough souvenir local shops and that food products and restaurants along the main highways are substandard, and tourism services in public transportation, accommodation, and tour operators are inadequate. Air transport is limited due to a shortage of service by the international airlines. Additionally, most local buses appear uncomfortable and out of date.

Decline in promotional campaigns, exhibitions, and festivals for local and international tourists: This topic was listed by the local tourism stakeholders.

3. Opportunities: O

For opportunity factors were listed as follows:

Plan of Railway project: which connects Dansavan (Savannakhet) and Lao Bao (Vietnam).

Establishment of the ASEAN community: The establishment of the ASEAN community in 2015 has provided remarkable opportunities in this area. It will encourage a frequent flow of travelers, trade, and investments to Savannakhet province.

Collaborations between the local government and national/international organizations: For instance, JICA (the Japan International Cooperation Agency), Sustainable Tourism Development Project, and SNV Lao Program supported the tourism sector in this province. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) supported Lao PDR as part of the Greater Mekong Subregion for tourism development, particularly border cities like Savannakhet. The planned initiative for tourism development is to support investment for ecotourism and handicraft production.

4. Threats: T

Threats were identified in various ways as follows:

Insufficiently continuous financial support: A shortage of financial resources is one of the threats to the development of tourism in Savannakhet. Most tourism development projects have depended on funding from foreign external organizations. The province has not yet become well-known to foreign tourism investors to contribute to investing, constructing tourism facilities and operating services. Although the number of tourism facilities have increased steadily, they are not sufficient to serve a large number of visitors when the ASEAN community is fully deployed.

Political situation/conflict/instability in neighboring countries: The tourism growth of Savannakhet depends mainly on visitors from neighboring countries, in particular Thailand and Vietnam. Therefore, intra- and inter-political issues in this region may negatively affect cross-border movements of tourists. For instance, in 2014 a military coup in Thailand resulted in continuous instability and led to a decline in inbound visits of Thai visitors.

Competition of tourism market: Savannakhet is not the only city that can benefit from the regional growth of tourism; other cities in Laos PDR or neighboring countries have also prepared and promoted their tourist facilities and services to attract many tourists in this region.

Regarding SWOT analysis, although there were five strengths related to destination characteristics for being a touristic site and strategic location, some weaknesses were identified as being detrimental to Savannakhet tourism growth. These need to be improved by all tourism stakeholders. For instance, many tour sites still do not have sufficient

attractive facilities and activities to encourage tourists to stay overnight or spend a longer period of time. Thus, tourism stakeholders should consider creating meaningful places, storytelling and establishing creative activities in order to perform the touristic place-making process. The Lao government can act as a host to drive tourism growth by boosting the connectivity network among neighboring and ASEAN countries.

Conclusion

This study examined the benefit factors that drive tourism growth, potential, and motivation in Savannakhet using a mixed-method research design. Savannakhet is one of the provinces in Lao PDR that has the potential to develop into a main tourist destination. Its natural sites contain numerous valuable species. Because of its geographical location and infrastructure development, Savannakhet is strategically located for trade and investment in Lao PDR. After the construction of the Second Friendship Bridge and the EWEC project in 2006, this province became better known to investors, traders, and international tourists. Furthermore, data also revealed that tourism growth is likely to be driven by economic development and government support. The free flow of trade, foreign investment, labor, and tourism will likely promote tourist activities and facilities throughout the region. Indeed, tourism growth has generated the expansion of sub-sectors such as hotels and restaurants dramatically.

Our study found that the major motivation for tourists to travel to Savannakhet included push and pull factors, e.g. similar culture, relaxation, and location as a gateway. Interestingly, one of the main reasons for visiting the province was casino gambling, but Savannakhet can also take advantage of its authentic cultural and natural sites as a unique and meaningful place. Following the focus group for SWOT analysis, although this city has the potential to serve as a major destination in ASEAN, its shortcomings would need to be resolved. Most of the tourist attractions in Savannakhet still lack attractiveness and sufficient variety in tourism packages and tour operators who can cater to individual travelers. In addition, its tourism growth relies on Thailand's socio-economic and political situation.

Policy Recommendations

Our suggestion for all tourism stakeholders is to emphasize improving services in the tourism sector, promoting tourist attractions, and strengthening the support of CBT in this area. Savannakhet is capable of improving and managing tourism through the development of community identity and branding for marketing communication. The province's history should be promoted as niche tourism, in addition to providing agricultural (agrotourism), gastronomy, and festival tourism. To extend tourism facilities for individual travelers and backpackers, public transport, particularly bus accessibility to remote towns with enough frequent service, must be improved. Moreover, a bus station should be provided at each village along the EWEC route. Finally, creative tourism should be applied to enhance the attractiveness of potential tourist sites and to design new experience exposure for tourists by offering opportunities for host/local and tourists to share and learn about each other's cultures based on local community management.

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